THE ART OF YIRRKALLA

(b) DEATH AND BURIAL

There are three important events in the life of every male aboriginal of Arnhem Land—in fact, in the life of any tribalized Australian aboriginal: birth, when he leaves the land of the spirits and enters the every-day world; initiation, when he is admitted into the sacred or ritualistic world, where age makes him increasingly important; and death, when he leaves the every-day world, and again enters into the land of the spirits.

Although there are few rituals associated with birth, those of initiation and the later age-grading ceremonies are long and complicated, for it is by these ceremonies that men are admitted deeper and deeper into the secret life of the tribe.

At death, the burial rituals extend over many weeks, their purpose being not only to send the spirit so happily to its future home that it will not be a danger to the living, but also to allow the living to adjust themselves to their loss.

The burial ceremonies at Yirrkalla have three main phases: (i) the ceremonies at death, (ii) the cleansing of the bones, and (iii) the final burial, after which the spirit of the dead leaves for its aboriginal 'heaven'. If the dead are of the *dua* moiety, the spirit goes to Purelko, and if of the *jiritja*, to Nalkuna.

(i) *The Ceremonies at Death*

When a man dies his relatives gather round the dead body, wailing loudly, the women cutting their scalps with sharpened bones until the blood flows freely. After a short period of wailing the men form a group apart from the women and chant the long series of songs which belong to the totemic group of their dead companion. Next morning the men proceed with the rites of burial, first by rubbing red ochre over the body of the corpse, and on that painting his totemic design.[13] The men also make two bark effigies[14] which they put under the arms of the corpse. They explain to him that the effigies are his children, whom they have killed and placed beside him to prevent him being lonely and wishing to return to haunt the living. The corpse is then wrapped in a thick layer of paper-bark and tied with string.

While all this is being done, other men are erecting a platform of logs about five feet in height and covering it with a layer of leaves. Then, while the men chant another series of totemic songs belonging to the dead man, two aborigines

13. This totemic design is the same as that painted on his body during circumcision. See body paintings associated with circumcision, Pl. 128. Warner (1937), pp. 415-16, in his description and interpretation of the mortuary rituals of the Murngin, an adjacent people, records that the totemic design is painted on the body of the dead man so that the spirits, or *Mokoi*, can identify him.

14. Similar to the bark figures, Fig. 65C, D. Frazer (1936), p. 59, records: 'In Tahiti . . . the priest took a number of small slips of plantain leaf-stalk, fixed two or three pieces under each arm of the corpse, placed a few on the breast, and then, addressing the corpse, said, "There are your family, there is your child, there is your wife, there is your father, and there is your mother. Be satisfied yonder (that is, in the world of the spirits). Look not toward those who are left in this world."'

3: Mountford E-5 (1948) 1956 O117 Murngin O117

climb to the top of the platform and, taking the corpse from those below, lay it on the bed of leaves,[15] face upwards.

As the two men descend, others blow a wooden trumpet informing the *Mokoi*[16] of the death, knowing that they will take the spirit from the locality for a time so that it will not be a danger to its living relatives. At the same time another man climbs a tall tree and makes a noise like the night-bird, *kunawak* (associated with the *Mokoi*).[17] As soon as the aboriginal in the tree hears the *Mokoi* coming (they make a coughing sound) he descends quickly and with the rest of the mourners runs quickly from the burial ground. This is done, not only to make the dead man's spirit go with the *Mokoi*, but because the *Mokoi*, particularly that of the newly dead man, are dangerous to the living.

(ii) *The Cleansing of the Bones*

For the next two or three months no one goes to the burial platform. When, however, putrefaction is complete, the maggots from the body have entered the ground and turned into blowflies, the aborigines meet to perform the second phase in the burial rituals, the cleansing of the bones.[18]

Totemic dances belonging to the clan of the dead man are performed to the accompaniment of much singing, the beating of music sticks and the blowing of the wooden trumpet. The noise of these rituals is supposed to scare the spirit of the dead man and his ghostly attendants, the *Mokoi*, from the burial platform. The body is lifted from the platform or, if an earth burial, exhumed and a curious ritual performed over it, in which two men sit, one on either side of the corpse, whilst a third thrusts a spear into it, saying that he has speared a turtle.[19] The women, who have been sitting at one side, then come forward, take the skeleton apart, wash the bones in water and wrap them in paper-bark to remove the smell. At the end of three days the women unwrap the bones, rub them with red ochre and place them in a temporary bark coffin, on the outside of which the men have painted the totemic symbols of the deceased.[20]

15. If when a man dies there are only a few people present, the corpse is wrapped in paper-bark and buried in the ground.

16. The *Mokoi* (*jintja*) and *Wuna* (*dua*) are spirits living in the jungle, who are always seeking souls of the newly dead for company. A dead person has two spirits, one, *wakinu*, which finally goes to 'a distant "heaven" (p. 326) and one which stays on earth. The latter are the *Mokoi*. (See Warner (1937), p. 116; also p. 338.) There are, however, many kinds of *Mokoi*, and our information about them is very limited.

17. See ceremonial staff of *kunuwak*, Pl. 134F.

18. See description of bark coffins, p. 317.

19. The significance of this ritual is obscure. Warner (1937), p. 143, refers to it. A similar ritual is supposed to be carried out at Purelko, the final resting place of the *dua* dead, p. 325.

20. Frazer (1936), p. 5, mentions that, 'In Misol, a small island to the north-west of New Guinea, . . . the body, wrapped in clothes, is deposited on a scaffold built for it in the forest. From time to time the relations come to inspect the corpse until decomposition is complete. The skeleton is then brought to the place, generally a cave, where the bones of all the dead inhabitants of the village are collected.' This is a similar burial custom to that carried out by the aborigines of north-eastern Arnhem Land and might well be the source from which the Arnhem Land custom originated.